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SUBJECT: Devouring Dragon, Disappearing Tigers: A Look at South
China's Tiger Farms and Reserves

11. (U) SUMMARY: China has launched a number of conservation efforts to save the remaining tigers in China, including the nearly extinct South China tiger. However, the demand for tiger products persists, much of it related to the vaunted health, medicinal and preservative qualities of the tiger; there are also questions as to the motivation of these tiger conservation efforts and it appears that the two preserves visited by Econoff really can't sustain themselves without undertaking some commercial actions that would affect the well being of the animals they are supposed to protect. END
SUMMARY

Endangered Species at Guilin Xiong Seng Tiger and Bear Farm

12. (U) The Guilin Xiong Seng Tiger and Bear Farm is located approximately 30 minutes outside of the city center of Guilin in Guangxi province. The farm boasts having 400 Asiatic black bears and 1300 rare tigers, including south China tigers, white tigers, and Siberian tigers. All of the animals are either endangered species, or in the case of the South China tiger, nearly extinct. A placard on the front gate of the farm indicated that the farm received funding from the State Forestry Administration. Econoff made an unofficial visit to the farm and had no official contact with the farm's management. At the time of Econoff's visit, there were only approximately 20 visitors to the farm.

13. (SBU) In April 2007, the British-based Independent Television Network and the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported that the farm was selling tiger meat at its restaurants as well as tiger paw and wine with tiger bone. During Econoff's visit there were newly-erected signs throughout the farm stating: "for the protection of Guilin Xiong Seng's Intellectual Property Rights, any photography, videotaping... or news-gathering is STRICTLY FORBIDDEN." However, there appeared to be no effort to enforce this regulation.

14. (SBU) The farm consists of two large open air areas for the black bears. Based on a quick count by Econoff, nearly 200 black bears were visible. Many of the bears appeared obese. Several bears that were close enough for us to observe had small patches of hair shaved off of their torsos.

15. (SBU) The tigers are divided by species and kept within open air areas or small caged pens. The tigers numbered up to five in an open area or up to three in a small pen. They appeared to be well fed and in good health. There were also a number of cages which

visitors were not allowed access to, but tigers could be spotted inside the cages. Econoff estimated the total number of tigers he saw at more than 500. The farm also had a small number of African lions.

¶16. (SBU) The farm included a theater where bear cubs and tigers performed in a circus-like environment. During the performance, Econoff witnessed several tigers being struck with a metal pole, while other tigers were whipped. The farm also has a dirt race track where several animals, such as camels and horses, raced. In addition, a mock Chinese marriage procession was performed with black bear cubs acting as bride and groom.

¶18. (SBU) There is also a large open space area that is allegedly a training area for tigers which are to be introduced into the wild. During Econoff's visit, visitors watched tigers hunt and kill oxen or water buffalo, which in theory could be useful in training a tiger to hunt and kill. Econoff also visited the nursery area of the farm where young animals were being raised. The tiger cubs in this area were eager to congregate near Econoff in anticipation of food. None of the cubs exhibited any fear of humans.

¶11. (SBU) The only educational area was a small museum at the far end of the farm, consisting of stuffed tigers and bears. Adjacent to the museum is a store selling powdered black bear bile and tiger wine, i.e. wine laced with powdered tiger bone. There were also a few tiger dolls, but they were not prominently displayed. Econoff could not find a building that was used for research or scientific purposes. Staff said there were no research facilities at the farm.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: The staff of the store was initially very suspicious and reluctant to discuss their products. However,

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Econoff convinced the staff that he was Korean and the staff became eager to sell items to the Econoff. The staff stated that up to three tour groups of Koreans came a day, numbering more than 30 in each group. The Koreans were among the most enthusiastic purchasers of both the black bear bile and the tiger wine, according to store staff. The staff also said that the export of these products to South Korea was not illegal, but was illegal to ship to Europe. The price for 500 ml of black bear bile was RMB 396 (approximately USD 52). Staff noted that it took approximately 5000 ml of bear bile to produce this powder, which allegedly has powerful medicinal attributes. The price of the tiger wine varied depending on the age of the wine. One year old wine cost RMB 80 (USD 10.50). Three year-old tiger wine cost RMB 420 (USD 55) and eight year-old tiger wine cost RMB 896 (USD 117). In the store, Econoff could see four large vats, allegedly full of tiger wine, on display.

¶13. (SBU) Comment: At the entrance of the farm were two restaurants but they both appeared to be closed. Locals said that until recently, both restaurants served tiger meat and that it was possible to purchase tiger skin but buyers were required to reserve them in advance. The staff denied tiger meat or tiger skin was available for purchase.

An Overview of Longyan Tiger Reserve

¶14. (U) Longyan Tiger Reserve is located approximately 3 hours outside of Xiamen in Fujian province. The Reserve was established by the Forestry Department in 2001 with a goal of increasing the number of nearly extinct south China tigers through natural breeding. Neither Forestry Department nor Reserve officials were willing to facilitate an official visit. Econoff spoke instead with working staff. Initially starting with six South China tigers, the reserve now boasts a population of 22 tigers. At the time of Econoff's visit, there were no other visitors to the reserve.

¶15. (U) The reserve consists of an inn with rooms and a restaurant, an abandoned monkey habitat, an abandoned bird habitat, and an operational tiger habitat. There is no evidence of a research or scientific facility at the reserve. Monitoring cameras at the tiger habitat were all unplugged.

¶16. (SBU) The inn had a stuffed South China tiger as a display in the main entrance with three stuffed tiger cubs. The inn also sold tiger wine from Guilin among other souvenirs. However, the staff denied that the store sold any other tiger products.

¶17. (SBU) The tiger habitat consisted of eight cages and four large open space areas. Econoff was able to observe 4 tigers in the open space areas as well as six tigers in the caged areas, including tiger cubs. The tigers appeared to be well fed and in good health. Several signs attached to the tiger enclosure indicated that four companies had previously sponsored the care of particular tigers.

¶18. (SBU) The staff stated that they were not aware of any plans to improve the marketing of the reserve, nor were they aware of plans to reintroduce tigers into the wild. When asked about scientific research, reserve staff, which included one member with daily contact with the tigers, said that he knew of no research being conducted at present.

Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!: Conservation or Consumption?

¶19. (SBU) Comment: Although Econoff was unable to confirm allegations that tiger meat was available at the Guilin Tiger Farm, the commercial nature of the farm was troubling. The large number of endangered tigers and bears present with no current plans to reintroduce to them into the wild raises concern regarding the motivation of such a farm. Given the cost of feeding and caring for the numerous tigers, lions and bears, it appears highly unlikely that the farm would be able to meet its costs based solely on the admission price and government subsidies. One local alleged that the farm was selling or leasing out tigers to other places. The source was unable to provide more detailed information regarding the fate of those animals and Econoff is unable to confirm this allegation.

¶20. (SBU) The Longyan reserve at this time does not appear to be a commercial operation similar to the Guilin farm. However, the lack

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of a plan regarding the future of the South China tigers located at this park, its similarities in the design and layout of the reserve compared to the Guilin farm, and no obvious sources of funding to provide for the care of the tigers raise troubling questions regarding the long-term purpose of the facility.

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